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## The Limits of the Academy: Notes on Education and Its Possibilities

### Abstract

In this essay, Max Rothschild considers education beyond the university in its current form. Drawing upon school abolitionist criticism, he draws attention to the ways in which narrative-making might open pathways toward liberatory horizons.

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## The Limits of the Academy: Notes on Education and Its Possibilities

In this essay, I will explore the political implications involved with navigating academia, its structural demands and constraints, what it would mean to create a “new” university bereft of its colonial foundations, and the potential for personal liberation via narrative making. Currently, the university is not structured in a way that benefits first-generation students, Black students, indigenous students, POC students, queer students, gender-nonconforming students, and students with disabilities. “Abolish the UC,” a collective of Black, indigenous, POC, queer, and first-generation graduate student workers within the University of California system, have written extensively on this subject. The organization outlines why the UC system needs to be abolished, the ways in which the university as we know it must change, and steps that should be taken in order to accomplish those goals *and* help students and low waged workers at these schools in the present. In the pages that follow, I will first outline “Abolish the UC”’s aim and its analysis of the contemporary university. I will then move to an analysis of Octavia Butler’s novel *Parable of The Talents*, and the way it positions a first-generation student in the novel. In doing so, I will consider the power of narrative making as a tool for liberation and pay close attention to the ways in which we can begin to create new modes of relation through writing that point toward liberatory horizons.

### **Abolish the UC and a Demand for Educational Reform**

Members of Abolish the UC have written extensively on the university, its structural limits, and the violence it produces. They advocate for the end of the university as we know it. This does not mean an end to knowledge production, or teaching—in fact, the organization explicitly understands the university as a place that cannot foster knowledge production or teaching in its fullest capacity. Abolish the UC envisions a university in which learning and teaching can exist encumbered by hierarchy, dehumanization, and the reproduction of elitism and class society. In an article published by the organization, titled “No University at the End of the World: On the Anti-Blackness of the University and the Union,” a writer named “Mack” expands on these ideas. Mack writes, “If we desire to build a new world grounded in an anarchistic, abolitionist ethic, we can start by abolishing the UC and creating space for a new kind of university, if we can even call it that anymore; one with no cops, no chancellors, no hierarchy, no gatekeeping of knowledge, no hoarding of resources, no exclusions” (Mack, “No University” 9). The “Abolish the UC” movement formed on the heels of police violence against Black students at UC campuses. When this article was published in 2020, abolishing the University of California Police Department was one of its central goals. Further, the group advocates for a “commitment to and process of transforming the social, economic, and political functions of the university in such a way that it is no longer the ‘university’ and so that we may create educational spaces that allow for the cultivation of Black freedom and

Black liberation” (8). Centrally, they argue that such cultivation is impossible within the university as it is currently composed.

In one sense, this is a form of narrative made towards liberation. It is a creative project that seeks to imagine new modes of relation that do not reproduce the violence of the contemporary university. It is within this line of thinking that I would also like to analyze Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Talents*. In the novel, Butler exposes readers to a first-generation narrative that thinks about narrative making as a tool for personal liberation, and the reimagining of one’s own place in the world. Although the novel is speculative science fiction, and not traditionally read as a first-generation narrative, I believe it firmly grounds itself in this genre.

### **Education and Personal Liberation: *Parable of the Talents***

In *Parable of the Talents*, the sequel to Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, readers follow both Lauren Olamina, the protagonist from the first novel, and her daughter Larkin. The novel begins in 2032, and Larkin, kidnapped as an infant, loses contact with Lauren until her early thirties. Larkin spends her childhood in the home of an abusive Christian fundamentalist family before her uncle, Marcos ‘Marc’ Duran, rescues her. While she lives with the Christian family, they rename her ‘Asha Vere’ after a popular *Dreamask* character. *Dreamasks* are virtual reality computer programs that allow users to lead the lives of fictional characters. For Larkin, Dreamasks become important. Larkin describes the masks as:

Computer-stimulated and guided dreams available to the public, and people love them. Dreamasks were related to old-fashioned lie detectors, to slave collars... in spite of the way they looked, Dreamasks were lightweight, clothlike, and comfortable. Each one offered wearers a whole series of adventures in which they could identify with any of several characters. They could live their character’s fictional life with complete realistic sensation (Butler 419).

Dreamasks provide a means for escape as much to constrict. They highlight the history of chattel slavery and its material and symbolic repercussions on the present. They at once signal the terror of the present, its structural limitations, and the way these limitations arise in everyday life. They also point towards the possibility of a different, more liberated way to exist in the world.

Asha Vere, the Dreamask character, is a Christian heroine who fights against “anti-Christian plots” (Butler 219). Larkin, who now goes by the same name, becomes inspired by these stories. She dreams of “doing great, heroic things” (Butler 261). In secret, Asha Vere begins making Dreamask scenarios herself at the age of twelve. Shy and lonely, she hides these creations from her family and uses them to create ‘scenarios’ that do not reproduce Christian fundamentalism. Although Dreamasks can be used to create any scenario, her Christian fundamentalist community bans anything that fails to adhere to Christian doctrine. Dissatisfied with the dry scenarios on offer, she creates her own. Larkin effectively begins to dream otherwise:

I wrote about having different parents—parents who cared about me and didn't wish always that I were another person, the sainted Kamaria. I didn't know at this time that I was adopted. All I had was the usual child's suspicion that I might be, and that somewhere, somehow, I might have beautiful, powerful 'real' parents who would come for me someday. I wrote about having four brothers and three sisters. The idea of eight children appealed to me. I didn't think you could be lonely in such a big family. My brothers and sisters and I had huge parties on holidays and birthdays and we were always having adventures, and I had a handsome boyfriend who was crazy about me, and the girls at school were all jealous (Butler 323).

Although the scenarios she creates are normative, they signal a desire for a life entirely unlike her own. She begins to use the Dreamasks as a tool to imagine individual liberation, if not a collective liberation that would move beyond the constraints of the present. To be sure, it is an act of resistance. Asha Vere tells readers, "I read a lot. I got a lot of the ideas from kids whose parents let them have nonreligious Masks and books—bad books, we called them" (324). Eventually, she is caught and punished for her determination to carve out a space she might call her own.

Once Asha Vere begins living with her uncle Marc, she attends college. Her mother never had the opportunity (although it is unclear if she receives an education later in life), given that she grew up in a post-apocalyptic, anarcho-capitalist dystopia. *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* each take place amidst the advent of climate devastation, which leads to societal upheaval. In time, Asha Vere earns a master's degree and begins to pursue a Ph.D. in History. She also begins creating Dreammask scenarios and begins working for "Dreammask International" (372). Asha Vere finds an imperfect kind of freedom through education. She gains confidence and creates a life for herself in which she can pursue meaningful work. Her education provides her with concrete tools with which she can pursue self-expression, intellectualism, and financial stability. With that in mind, she becomes the employee of a multinational corporation and thus can only find this sense of freedom via unfreedom, working within a deeply hierarchical system that primarily serves to reproduce exploitation and need at the service of profit. Her dreams become manifest in the form of a job that serves corporate interests. For Asha Vere freedom can only surface within contradiction.

In Nancy Mack's article "Emotional Labor as Imposters," Mack delves into identity formation and critical narrative making. She explains that narrative making based around personal experience is a crucial tool for first-generation and working-class students. It provides students with space to become comfortable with writing and it allows them to forge a sense of belonging in the academy. She argues that "emotion" is a central factor in this process. She writes, "My belief is that the discourse of emotion colors all learning experiences so that when we learn anything, we also learn our place within the social hierarchy in relation to that knowledge. In other words, our expected emotional performance is communicated to us with every skill we learn, and those expectations are based on cultural stereotypes of identities" (Mack, "Emotional Labor as Imposters" 146). This is precisely what Asha Vere positions herself against. Limited by her upbringing, which imposed a strict gender divide, Asha Vere manufactures a different life primarily via narrative making.

Asha Vere's story helps to expose the limits and potentialities of academia and the first-generation college experience. On one hand, academia serves as a "way out" (though this

has become less and less the case with the increase in four-year degree holders, and the contemporary economic climate and job market); on the other, it remains circumscribed within firmly demarcated boundaries. Is academia really a “way out”? Or is it a structural apparatus that ensures the reproduction of the very *concept* of a way out? In other words, if academia is a system that reproduces race, class, and gender disparities and funnels students into oppressive systems, academia represents something much more complex. The academy, more than anything else, is a tool for social reproduction. It reproduces the world as we know it and the disparities therein.

## Conclusion

Given the hierarchy that academia under capitalism cannot help but create, it is less a “way out” than a contradictory means to an end. It carries as many positives as negatives. It carries the potential to open a path towards a complicated kind of personal liberation, but at what cost to the collective? If we consider the notion of an abolitionist university, we must recognize that it “is not simply about the redistribution of university resources in a more equitable or non-carceral way, but rather an ongoing commitment to and process of transforming the social, economic, and political functions of the university in such a way that is no longer the ‘University’” (Mack, “No University” 8). Abolish the UC quotes David Stovall’s remarks on an abolitionist university as follows: “school abolition seeks to eliminate the order, compliance and dehumanization that happens in [school] buildings while allowing for the capacity to imagine and enact a radical imaginary” (Mack, “No University” 8). These are exceedingly worthwhile goals and Butler’s novel helps to highlight how they cannot come about under our current educational system, or those that mirror our own.

Audre Lorde also offers some insight into these questions in her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” In the oft-taught meditation on feminism, academia, class, racism, and liberation, Lorde explains why the tools of the oppressor cannot liberate the oppressed. Lorde writes, “It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish” (107-108). At present, academia cannot fully identify with those who exist outside normative structures; a university that not only allows for this but can also transform how we conceive of such ideas is what we must strive for. Lorde continues, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support” (108). Lorde encapsulates the critique of academia succinctly. We must challenge its ordering principles. It cannot be our only means of support, our only path towards a better life. For a truly liberated university, disinvesting from the university as colonial tool and instrument of capital is a necessity.

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